

Envisioning Inclusive Communities and Schools for the 21st Century

Introduction

As Iowans, we have a rich history of valuing diversity. However, the dawn of a new century provides a new opportunity to reflect on what valuing diversity and building inclusiveness could mean to the citizens of Iowa. This paper is a glimpse of a vision—a vision that will guide Iowans in valuing diversity and building inclusiveness in their schools and communities. This vision anticipates that schools and other community institutions will collaborate to ensure that all students achieve at high levels. This vision anticipates schools and communities that model and teach respect for diversity. In addition, these schools and communities will provide learning experiences that enable students to learn the knowledge, skills, and habits they need to be successful in diverse environments and in a global economy.

The State

Critical to the success of this vision of inclusiveness is strong leadership and support at the state level. The state requires that schools and communities be proactive in building inclusiveness, while allowing for flexibility at the local level. State governing boards and state government agencies collaborate in solving problems and work together to provide support for building inclusive schools and communities at the local level. State leadership communicates the strengths and advantages of diversity in promoting economic prosperity as well as a rich and dynamic social fabric. State agencies adopt policies, implement practices and appropriate funds for education, housing, health and social services, public safety and economic development, which have the impact of bringing diverse citizens together rather than isolating them. A strong system to protect citizens from discrimination is put into place and proactive mediation services are available when conflicts arise.

The Community

The Iowa community of the 21st century clearly understands that economic growth, vitality, and growing diversity go hand in hand. It is a community that welcomes and supports its citizens, regardless of their heritage or life circumstance. It is a community with an outreach plan or welcome center so that new residents can ask questions and get information about services and activities. It is a community where existing families volunteer to mentor new families. The community has intentionally planned for a wide range of housing from high to low cost without developing socioeconomic isolation. It is a community where education for all is a deep and abiding value. The citizens of the community engage in deliberative discussions about education on a routine and regular basis. The leaders of all community institutions, such as, schools, churches, media, business, labor, health, government, and human services communicate and work together to provide services to meet the needs of all community members. There are community forums to both discuss and celebrate diversity. Steps are taken to confront prejudice and discrimination and to support its victims.

The School

The school is an inclusive institution, which serves as a center for learning in the community. As a learning center, its mission is to assist all students to maximize their achievement. Early childhood education programs are available for all families who need them to help insure that children enter kindergarten ready to learn. In addition, as a learning center, the school provides students with a safe place to take those risks that are an integral part of the learning process. Students are supported by a school climate and by practices that clearly communicate that they are all valued and respected, regardless of their gender, disability, race, national origin, religion, sexual orientation or socio-economic status. Diversity is valued and celebrated, and the school consciously plans in such a way as to bring students from different backgrounds together. Such planning is grounded in the firm belief that diversity strengthens the school and the community and offers all of its members greater opportunities for learning and growing. School buildings and educational programs are accessible to all students and community members, regardless of age or disability. Accommodations are made to meet the needs of students with disabilities, English language learners, and community members.

Leadership

The board members and administrators of an inclusive school are visible as leaders in the school and in the broader community. They are the catalysts who build bridges between diverse groups of citizens. They work in partnership with leaders of other community institutions to improve both the schools and the community. They also facilitate public deliberation about the interaction of schools and the community in order to determine ways in which the schools and the community can connect for the benefit of all citizens. School leaders actively and consciously recruit broad representation from the community to assess student achievement and educational needs. They actively involve the community in developing and implementing educational programs that address the identified needs; in other words, their goal is to engage the broader community in proactively and intentionally planning schooling. Their leadership skills include modeling, facilitating, coaching and mediating and are focused on student achievement. These leaders are active in communicating the benefits diversity brings to the school community as well as to the broader community. In order to make inclusion a reality, the administrators consciously make efforts to recruit and hire staff members who bring new skills, experiences, and backgrounds to the school and community. School board members make policy decisions that support those actions required to build inclusiveness. Leadership establishes priorities to ensure necessary actions are taken in the classrooms, hallways, and on playgrounds to ensure an emotionally and physically safe environment for all. Meeting the educational needs of all learners is the number one priority.

Teachers

The teachers in an inclusive school and community have high expectations for the academic achievement of all students. In order to impact student achievement their behaviors include: respecting their students and commanding respect in return; viewing parents/guardians and students as partners with them in the teaching and learning process; working with students to closely monitor academic achievement; working with students

to report academic achievement to parents/guardians; and providing opportunities for students to collaborate and learn from one another. In order to support the climate and practices of an inclusive school in an inclusive community, teachers model respect for diversity; recognize both the commonalities and the differences among the students in their classroom; allow students to celebrate their diversity and the diversity of their community; and strive to instill a strong sense of citizenship in their students.

These teachers understand the teaching and learning process; therefore, they are more likely to facilitate and coach for learning, rather than only dispense facts. Their classroom includes the community as they utilize its many resources for learning and find ways to connect their students with that broader community. Their classrooms and their teaching repertoire reflect the diversity of the community, the state and the nation. They confront intolerance and bigotry, and they help students mediate conflicts when they arise. Teachers feel supported in an atmosphere that encourages them as they strive to improve their skills and learn about their students and their communities.

Educational Program

Within an inclusive school and inclusive district an array of programs and services are provided that are coordinated across and among the school and various community agencies. The curriculum of the school strives to develop the whole person and all of their abilities. It provides a solid foundation in the communication skills, which will facilitate positive interaction between diverse groups of students. It also develops competence in life skills related to problem solving, life long learning, career planning, citizenship and teamwork within a workplace context. Technological literacy and literacy in a second language are supported and encouraged for all students. Inclusive schools provide authentic and meaningful experiences that include opportunities to apply learning in the school and in the community. The curriculum is appropriate to each student's maturity and development. Curricular and extracurricular activities are accessible to all students. Programs for the arts, athletics and academic competitions are equally valued and supported. They allow for students to actively participate at their own levels and to meet their own goals. Barriers to participation for particular groups of students have been identified and removed.

Options are present within inclusive school districts and its schools to provide choice and to meet the individual needs of students and families. Parents/Guardians have opportunities for their children to attend a school other than their school of residence. When schools within a district cannot meet the unique needs of a student, the district collaborates with surrounding school districts to meet those needs. Choices that create a more inclusive student population are promoted and receive priority.

The contributions and perspectives of diverse racial, ethnic and cultural groups, both men and women as well as persons with disabilities are included in all curriculum areas. Resources in the broader community, as well as technology, are used to expand learning opportunities and to communicate with diverse persons and with other communities. Interpersonal and inter-group communication competencies are taught as basic components of the curriculum. Racism, sexism, homophobia, religious bigotry, stereotyping, and classism, in both historical and contemporary contexts, are confronted. Students are empowered as partners in building an inclusive climate and inclusive practices within the school and the community. Enrichment activities are provided for

every student. The educational program is directed by a belief that diversity, mutual respect, interdependence and high expectations for all are assets.

Students

Students new to the school and community are assigned mentors to ease their transition into a new environment. Students are expected to achieve at high levels and are encouraged to be aware of and express pride in their cultural heritage/s. They experience diversity in their interactions with their peers, the staff, and the curriculum. As they work in heterogeneous groups and classes, they learn from and about one another. Through these experiences they are guided to become aware of the many things they have in common with their classmates, and they learn not to be threatened by the differences. They are comfortable talking about diversity, and they are actively involved in celebrating commonalities and differences. They feel included. They have a sense of belonging. They are able to solve conflicts through negotiation and mediation rather than resorting to violence. Students understand their rights as well as their responsibilities as citizens of their local community, their state and their country. As citizens of a nation of immigrants participating in a global economy, they are aware of the links between their community and other communities in other nations around the world. They actively engage in learning experiences that connect them to the broader community. Students recognize that the school and the community have been partners in their education and that, as students, they are not only the beneficiaries of the partnership, but they also have responsibility for continuing the relationship when they assume adult role/s in this or any other community.

Parents and Family

The inclusive school recognizes that parents, guardians and family are a student's first and primary teachers. Parental and family involvement in the learning process is seen as essential to developing and sustaining high academic achievement and citizenship.

The school emphasizes and supports strategies that facilitate parental/family involvement in the learning process of their children. There is a building advisory council in every school, which involves parents in policy and decision-making. The school climate is welcoming to parents and family members and provides opportunities for them to be involved in classroom learning activities. There is a communication system through which parents and family members can check for homework assignments and leave messages for teachers. Students are actively involved in parent conferences along with the teacher.

The school sponsors activities that bring parents and families from diverse backgrounds together and helps them to get to know one another better. The school is open in the evenings and offers adult education, parenting and homework assistance courses. The gymnasium is used to provide family recreational opportunities. Childcare is provided in an effort to facilitate attendance at these events. Activities planned at school to recognize and celebrate diversity are family affairs.

Conclusion

Our schools and communities are the foundation of our state. Each community and school must continuously strive to meet challenges as Iowa's population and that of the world around it changes and grows. They must continuously strive to become welcoming and supportive living and learning environments for all their citizens regardless of their gender, race, national origin, disability, religion, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation. Those efforts will help insure that all Iowans achieve their full potential as contributing citizens of their local community, the State of Iowa, the United States and the world. We must constantly strive to close the gap that exists between the reality in our communities and this vision of inclusive schools and communities.